

Washington Merry-go-round

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WASHINGTON — Apparently the old television series, "Mission Impossible," was all too accurate about the practice of government leaders ordering unlawful missions and disowning their underlings if caught.

There is reason to believe, for example, that past presidents knew more than the record discloses about the dirty doings of the Central Intelligence Agency. Now we have obtained secret evidence that the late J. Edgar Hoover played the same game.

Some of his former officials today face prosecution for illegal break-ins, bag jobs and buggings that the powerful FBI chief may have ordered secretly. The evidence indicates he carefully covered his own tracks to avoid personal embarrassment if his agents were caught.

On the record, Hoover placed in the official files memos and orders ostentatiously taking a firm stand against unlawful tactics. On Jan. 6, 1967, he notified two of his top aides that he would not approve requests for illegal planting of listening devices on private premises.

"I have previously indicated that I do not intend to approve any such requests in the future," he declared emphatically, "and, consequently, no such recommendations should be submitted for approval of such matters. This practice, which includes also surreptitious entrances of any kind, will not meet with my approval in the future."

Obviously, this was intended to persuade future historians that Hoover scrupulously obeyed the laws he was supposed to enforce. Any evidence to the contrary naturally would not be left lying around. But this much is known:

Under pressure from then-President Richard Nixon to disrupt leftwing extremists, the FBI continued its criminal trespassing and eavesdropping until Hoover's death in 1972.

Virtually nothing went on in the close-knit FBI that escaped Hoover's notice. Even veteran colleagues feared to take any major action without his being informed. Almost every paper clip had to be accounted for.

The late William C. Sullivan, a member of Hoover's inner sanctum, told a federal grand jury that in 1970 he relayed instructions from the FBI director to field agents that they should employ "any means necessary" to bring the extremists groups to book. He said Hoover cautiously avoided directly mentioning wiretapping, electronic listening and other forbidden acts. But Sullivan said, within the context of the discussion, the tacit approval was so clear "it needed no interpretation from me." Sullivan resigned in 1972 in a bitter break with Hoover and died recently in a hunting accident.

—Although interdepartmental documents attest to Hoover's disavowal of unlawful practices, an intriguing internal report was circulated after Hoover met with then-CIA chief Richard Helms and other intelligence officials. The memo admitted that the FBI was conducting "microphone surveillance" of 13 extremists, including the home of Black Panther leader Huey Newton. It is virtually impossible to plant a microphone in someone's home without trespassing.

—Following Hoover's death, the Justice Department disclosed to a closed-door Senate investigation that 14 "subversive targets were the subject of at least 238 entries" by the FBI continuing until April 1968. This would have been more than a year after Hoover's final disavowal. Our sources are emphatic that none of these would have been initiated without Hoover's sanction.

—When the Watergate gang came up with a proposal to crack down on Nixon's political enemies by violating their basic rights, Hoover was credited with opposing the nefarious campaign. But a memo to Attorney General John Mitchell from the FBI chief pledged cooperation. "Despite my clearcut and specific opposition," Hoover wrote, "the FBI is prepared to implement the instructions of the White House at your direction. Of course, we would continue to seek your specific authorization, where appropriate, to utilize the various sensitive investigative techniques involved in individual cases."

—We disclosed last year that the FBI not only planted microphones in an effort to discredit the late Martin Luther King Jr., but considered an illicit break-in and bugging to trap King's convicted assassin, James Earl Ray, in 1968. The mike was supposed to be planted on the premises of Ray's kinfolk. The FBI plotters acknowledged in a secret memo that someone would have to install "the devices by trespass." But the memo added that "the government of the United States should surely be willing to pick up the tab for any judgment against those who installed the microphones." At the bottom, the bulldog Hoover scrawled "OK" and an imperious initial "H."

—Under closed-door questioning at the Senate, an FBI official admitted that another "black bag job" had taken place in April 1968, and that approval would have had to come from above, meaning Hoover. Sen. Richard Schweiker, R.-Pa., noted this was a "clear-cut situation where a memo says one thing and yet one or two people at the top are doing something differently, whether it is setting up a 'do not file' procedure or going against a memo they issued."